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Not the Time for Secrecy

PRESIDENT Kennedy delivered a doleful message to American newspapers Thursday night. The dangers to American society are so great, said the President, that every newspaper should ask regarding every story it prints, "Is it in the national interest?"

The President recognized the need for "far greater public information," but offset this need with "the need for far greater official secrecy."

In effect, the President warned the national press that it will from now on receive less information from government sources about any matter pertaining to national security. And virtually everything the government does is related to national security.

What brought on the presidential warning was the part played by the press in the recent "invasion" of Cuba. The U.S. government looked bad at the time, and the American press may have made it appear even worse. (There was, of course, no way to keep it secret.)

The President charged that enemies of the United States were able to get information from the American press that would have otherwise required extensive spying.

It is true that American newspapers did not do an accurate job in reporting the invasion attempt; this shortcoming was compounded, however, by the breakoff in communications from Cuba, and by the policy of U.S. officials.

The President was also concerned about this poor work by the press. He was concerned about the good work, both before and after the invasion, of reporting U.S. participation in the invasion. Stories began appearing in newspapers and magazines as early as January which told how

Cuban rebels were being trained and armed.

If the government had done a thorough job in training the Cuban invasion force, the information would not have been so casually reported in the press. Bigger stories — the Manhattan A-bomb project for one — have been kept secret. But then there was no mistaking the matter of national security.

The crux of the matter lies in the American concept of "public interest." Americans believe that the press is entitled to a view of the public interest different from that held by the government.

When the government is totally committed to a course of action for the sake of national security, the press will treat it gingerly. In the Cuban affair, the government was not acting as if the nation's security was at stake, and the reporters worked diligently, perhaps more diligently than the CIA.

Supposing now from the President's words that the U.S. government is committed to releasing Cuba from Castro's dictatorship, and to protecting the rest of Latin America against communism, there is yet a need for the American press to report on, and possibly differ with, the national security program carried on by the government.

On the subject of defense spending, for example, the press is the principal means the public has for learning how tax money is being appropriated.

The President's words open the way for such information to be stopped. There is a new urgency — "our way of life is under attack" — that America must face. But America cannot survive that hostile attack unless her people are informed and her press is free to differ.

The above editorial also appeared

in the following other newspaper : EAST ST. LOUIS JOURNAL,

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